

# The Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) Initiative



## ACORN Background

ACORN is a collaborative initiative that aims to: (1) systematically screen Veterans for social needs within 10 domains; (2) provide clinical teams with real-time information about Veterans' unmet needs; and (3) offer Veterans relevant resources and referrals to VA and community services.

### Domains Covered in the ACORN Screener



Employment



Technology



Social Isolation



Legal



Transportation



Education



Interpersonal  
Safety



Food Security



Housing



Utilities

## Significance of ACORN

Given the adverse impact of social needs on health outcomes, healthcare organizations have increasingly recognized the importance of identifying and managing unmet needs. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) currently screens Veterans for food insecurity, housing instability, and intimate partner violence, but lacks a systematic screening process to identify social needs more broadly. ACORN provides clinical care teams with a broader understanding of the social and economic contexts impacting individual Veterans.

*ACORN aims to systematically identify and address social needs among all Veterans to improve health outcomes and promote health equity.*

## Implementing ACORN

ACORN has been implemented in several VA clinical settings, including Primary Care, Women's Health, Mental Health, Social Work, and Peer Support. Veterans can complete ACORN screening prior to or during clinic visits through one of two mechanisms: 1) self-administered screening on paper or an electronic tablet; or 2) staff-administered screening directly in the VHA electronic health record. Veterans who screen positive are provided with geographically tailored resource guides, resource navigation support, and/or referrals to Social Work.

## Using ACORN in a VA Clinic or Hospital

We are currently implementing and evaluating ACORN in a variety of clinical settings across the VHA. The ACORN Team is available to support clinical teams interested in implementing this program. Please contact our team at [VHABEDACORN@va.gov](mailto:VHABEDACORN@va.gov) with any questions or to discuss expansion to your site. For additional resources, please see:

- [Systematic Screening of Veterans for Health-related Social Needs: An Ethical Imperative](#)
- [VA Podcast Network - Social Determinants of Health: Veteran Health Equity Podcast, Episode 1](#)
- [VA Office of Health Equity Social Determinants of Health](#)



**(1) In the past two months, have you been living in stable housing that you own, rent, or stay in as part of a household?<sup>1</sup>**

a. Yes – Living in stable housing

↳ **(1.1) Are you worried or concerned that in the next two months you may NOT have stable housing that you own, rent, or stay in as part of a household?<sup>1</sup>**

i. Yes – worried about housing near future

↳ **(1.2) Where have you lived for MOST of the past two months?<sup>1</sup>**

a. Apartment/House/Room (no government subsidy)

b. Apartment/House/Room (with government subsidy)

c. With Friend/Family

d. Motel/Hotel

e. Short-term Institution like Hospital, Rehab Center, Drug Treatment Center

f. Homeless Shelter

g. Anywhere outside (e.g. Street, Vehicle, Abandoned Building)

h. Other

ii. No – Not worried about housing near future

b. No – Not living in stable housing

↳ **Collect answer for the question “Where have you lived for MOST of the past two months?”<sup>1</sup>**

➤ *If respondent endorses either “not living in stable housing” OR “worried about housing near future” for (1):*

**(1.3) Are you currently without a place to stay?**

a. Yes

b. No

**(2) I’m going to read you two statements that people have made about their food situation. For each statement, please tell me whether the statement was often true, sometimes true, or never true for your household in the last 12 months.**

**(2.1) Within the past 12 months, you worried whether your food would run out before you got money to buy more.<sup>2</sup>**

a. Often true

b. Sometimes true

c. Never true

**(2.2) Within the past 12 months, the food you bought just didn’t last and you didn’t have money to get more.<sup>2</sup>**

a. Often true

b. Sometimes true

c. Never true

➤ *If respondent endorses “often true” or “sometimes true” for either “food would run out” OR “food didn’t last” for (2):*

**(2.3) Do you need help getting food for this week?**

a. Yes

b. No

**(3) How often do you have trouble paying for your utilities (i.e., electric, gas, oil, water, or phone)?<sup>3</sup>**

a. Often

b. Sometimes

c. Never

➤ *If respondent endorses “often” or “sometimes” for (3):*

**(3.1) Has the electric, gas, oil, or water company threatened to shut off services in your home?<sup>4</sup>**

a. Yes

b. No

c. Already shut off

**(4) How often has lack of transportation kept you from medical appointments, meetings, work, or from getting things needed for daily living?<sup>5</sup>**

a. Often

b. Sometimes

c. Never

➤ *If respondent endorses “often” or “sometimes” for (4):*

**(4.1) Do you have an upcoming appointment that you need transportation assistance to?**

a. Yes

b. No

**(Continued)**



- (5) Do you currently have any legal issues you need help with?
- a. Yes b. No
- (6) How often do you feel lonely or isolated from those around you?<sup>6</sup>
- a. Often b. Sometimes c. Never
- (7) How often does anyone close to you physically hurt you or threaten you with harm?<sup>7</sup>
- a. Often b. Sometimes c. Never
- (8) Do you want help finding or keeping work or a job?<sup>8</sup>
- a. Yes, help finding work b. Yes, help keeping work c. I do not need or want help
- (9) Do you want more information about educational benefits and resources for Veterans?
- a. Yes b. No
- (10) Do you have access to any of the following devices? (Please select all that apply.)
- ☐ Simple cell phone (flip phone) ☐ Computer (laptop, desktop, or tablet such as an iPad)
- ☐ Smartphone (a cell phone with a touchscreen and internet) ☐ None
- (11) Do you have access to affordable and reliable internet at home?
- a. Yes b. No c. I don't want internet access at home
- (12) How often do you run out of phone minutes and/or data before the end of the month?
- a. Often b. Sometimes c. Never d. I don't have a cellphone (flip phone or smartphone)
- (13) Veterans can now have video visits with their care team from home or another location of their choice. Would you like help setting up a future video visit with a member of your VA care team?
- a. Yes b. No c. I already know how to do video visits/don't need help d. I don't know what a video visit is
- If respondent endorses "yes" for (13):
- (13.1) Do you need help learning to use a smartphone, tablet, or computer for video visits at the VA?
- a. Yes b. No c. I don't have any of these devices

When derived from the [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(CMS\) Accountable Health Communities \(AHC\) Screener](#), the original source is cited per [AHC guidance](#). Questions without citations were developed by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) ACORN core team and collaborators across multiple VHA offices and sites.

1. VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans. "Homeless Screener." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, September 2020. <https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/resources/prevention/homeless-screener.asp>
2. Hager, E. R., Quigg, A. M., Black, M. M., Coleman, S. M., Heeren, T., Rose-Jacobs, R., Cook, J. T., Ettinger de Cuba, S. E., Casey, P. H., Chilton, M., Cutts, D. B., Meyers A. F., Frank, D. A. (2010). Development and Validity of a 2-Item Screen to Identify Families at Risk for Food Insecurity. *Pediatrics*, 126(1), 26-32. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-3146.
3. Adapted with permission from Page-Reeves J, Kaufman W, Bleecker M, Norris J, McCalmont K, Ianakieva V, Ianakieva D, Kaufman A. Addressing Social Determinants of Health in a Clinic Setting: The WellRx Pilot in Albuquerque, New Mexico. *J Am Board Fam Med*. 2016 May-Jun;29(3):414-8. doi: 10.3122/jabfm.2016.03.150272. PMID: 27170801.
4. Adapted with permission from Cook, J. T., Frank, D. A., Casey, P. H., Rose-Jacobs, R., Black, M. M., Chilton, M., . . . Cutts, D. B. (2008). A Brief Indicator of Household Energy Security: Associations with Food Security, Child Health, and Child Development in US Infants and Toddlers. *Pediatrics*, 122(4), 867-875. doi:10.1542/peds.2008-0286.
5. Adapted with permission from the national PRAPARE® social determinants of health protocol developed by the National Association of Community Health Centers, the Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations, and the Oregon Primary Care Organization and their development partners. [www.nachc.org/prapare](http://www.nachc.org/prapare). ©National Association of Community Health Centers. All Rights Reserved.
6. Adapted with permission from Anderson, G. Oscar and Colette E. Thayer. *Loneliness and Social Connections: A National Survey of Adults 45 and Older*. Washington, DC: AARP Research, September 2018. <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00246.001>
7. Adapted with permission from Sherin, K. M., Sinacore, J. M., Li, X. Q., Zitter, R. E., & Shakil, A. (1998). HITS: a Short Domestic Violence Screening Tool for Use in a Family Practice Setting. *Family Medicine*, 30(7), 508-512.
8. Identifying and Recommending Screening Questions for the Accountable Health Communities Model (2016, July) Technical Expert Panel discussion conducted at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Baltimore, MD

**ACORN SCREENING TOOL QUESTION SOURCE TABLE****Project Title:** Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN)**Funders:** VHA Office of Health Equity**Project Leads:** Alicia Cohen, MD, MSc, FAAFP, Meaghan Kennedy, MD, MPH, Lauren Russell, MPP**Project Coordinator:** Kathleen Mitchell, MPH**Project Contact Email:** [VHABEDACORN@va.gov](mailto:VHABEDACORN@va.gov)**Table.** Sources of SDOH items used in the ACORN screening tool.

When derived from the [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(CMS\) Accountable Health Communities \(AHC\) Screener](#), the original source is cited per [AHC guidance](#). Questions without citations were developed by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) ACORN core team and collaborators across multiple VHA offices and sites.

Domain	Question	Original Source	Citation
Housing	In the past two months, have you been living in stable housing that you own, rent, or stay in as part of a household? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes – Living in stable housing</li> <li>• No – Not living in stable housing</li> </ul>	VHA Clinical Reminder	VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans. “Homeless Screener.” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, September 2020. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/resources/prevention/homeless-screener.asp">https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/resources/prevention/homeless-screener.asp</a>
	Are you worried or concerned that in the next two months you may NOT have stable housing that you own, rent, or stay in as part of a household? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes – worried about housing near future</li> <li>• No – not worried about housing near future</li> </ul>		
	Where have you lived for MOST of the past two months? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apartment/House/Room (no government subsidy)</li> <li>• Apartment/House/Room (with government subsidy)</li> <li>• With Friend/Family</li> <li>• Motel/Hotel</li> <li>• Short-term Institution like Hospital, Rehab Center, Drug Treatment Center</li> <li>• Homeless Shelter</li> <li>• Anywhere outside (e.g. Street, Vehicle, Abandoned Building)</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>		
	Are you currently without a place to stay? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>	Developed by VHA ACORN team	Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell K, Russell LE. “The Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) Initiative.” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, February 2022. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a>

Domain	Question	Original Source	Citation
<b>Food</b>	<p>Within the past 12 months, you worried whether your food would run out before you got money to buy more.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often True</li> <li>• Sometimes True</li> <li>• Never True</li> </ul>	VHA Clinical Reminder, based on Hunger Vital Signs	Hager, E. R., Quigg, A. M., Black, M. M., Coleman, S. M., Heeren, T., Rose-Jacobs, R., Cook, J. T., Ettinger de Cuba, S. E., Casey, P. H., Chilton, M., Cutts, D. B., Meyers A. F., Frank, D. A. (2010). Development and Validity of a 2-Item Screen to Identify Families at Risk for Food Insecurity. <i>Pediatrics</i> , 126(1), 26-32. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-3146.
<b>Food, cont.</b>	<p>Within the past 12 months, the food you bought just didn't last and you didn't have money to get more.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often True</li> <li>• Sometimes True</li> <li>• Never True</li> </ul>	VHA Clinical Reminder, based on Hunger Vital Signs	Hager, E. R., Quigg, A. M., Black, M. M., Coleman, S. M., Heeren, T., Rose-Jacobs, R., Cook, J. T., Ettinger de Cuba, S. E., Casey, P. H., Chilton, M., Cutts, D. B., Meyers A. F., Frank, D. A. (2010). Development and Validity of a 2-Item Screen to Identify Families at Risk for Food Insecurity. <i>Pediatrics</i> , 126(1), 26-32. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-3146.
	<p>Do you need help getting food for this week?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>	Developed by VHA ACORN team	Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell K, Russell LE. "The Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) Initiative." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, February 2022. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a>
<b>Utilities</b>	<p>How often do you have trouble paying for your utilities (i.e., electric, gas, oil, water, or phone)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often</li> <li>• Sometimes</li> <li>• Never</li> </ul>	WellRx	Adapted with permission from Page-Reeves J, Kaufman W, Bleecker M, Norris J, McCalmont K, Ianakieva V, Ianakieva D, Kaufman A. Addressing Social Determinants of Health in a Clinic Setting: The WellRx Pilot in Albuquerque, New Mexico. <i>J Am Board Fam Med</i> . 2016 May-Jun;29(3):414-8. doi: 10.3122/jabfm.2016.03.150272. PMID: 27170801.
	<p>Has the electric, gas, oil, or water company threatened to shut off services in your home?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> <li>• Already shut off</li> </ul>	Children's Health Watch – Household Energy Security Screener (via AHC)	Adapted with permission from Cook, J. T., Frank, D. A., Casey, P. H., Rose-Jacobs, R., Black, M. M., Chilton, M., . . . Cutts, D. B. (2008). A Brief Indicator of Household Energy Security: Associations with Food Security, Child Health, and Child Development in US Infants and Toddlers. <i>Pediatrics</i> , 122(4), 867-875. doi:10.1542/peds.2008-0286.
<b>Transportation</b>	<p>How often has lack of transportation kept you from medical appointments, meetings, work, or from getting things needed for daily living?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often</li> <li>• Sometimes</li> <li>• Never</li> </ul>	PRAPARE	Adapted with permission from the national PRAPARE® social determinants of health protocol developed by the National Association of Community Health Centers, the Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations, and the Oregon Primary Care Organization and their development partners. <a href="http://www.nachc.org/prapare">www.nachc.org/prapare</a> . ©National Association of Community Health Centers. All Rights Reserved.

Domain	Question	Original Source	Citation
	Do you have an upcoming appointment that you need transportation assistance to? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>	Developed by VHA ACORN team	Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell K, Russell LE. "The Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) Initiative." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, February 2022. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a>
<b>Legal</b>	Do you currently have any legal issues you need help with? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>	Developed by VHA ACORN team	Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell K, Russell LE. "The Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) Initiative." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, February 2022. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a>
<b>Social Isolation and Loneliness</b>	How often do you feel lonely or isolated from those around you? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often</li> <li>• Sometimes</li> <li>• Never</li> </ul>	AARP Survey (via AHC)	Adapted with permission from Anderson, G. Oscar and Colette E. Thayer. Loneliness and Social Connections: A National Survey of Adults 45 and Older. Washington, DC: AARP Research, September 2018. <a href="https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00246.001">https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00246.001</a>
<b>Safety</b>  <i>Note: Question excluded in some clinical settings</i>	How often does anyone close to you physically hurt you or threaten you with harm? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often</li> <li>• Sometimes</li> <li>• Never</li> </ul>	Hurt, Insult, Threaten, and Scream (HITS) Tool for Intimate Partner Violence Screening (via AHC, which broadened it to interpersonal violence)	Adapted with permission from Sherin, K. M., Sinacore, J. M., Li, X. Q., Zitter, R. E., & Shakil, A. (1998). HITS: a Short Domestic Violence Screening Tool for Use in a Family Practice Setting. Family Medicine, 30(7), 508-512.
<b>Employment</b>	Do you want help finding or keeping work or a job? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, help finding work</li> <li>• Yes, help keeping work</li> <li>• I do not need to want help</li> </ul>	Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services - Accountable Health Communities Technical Expert Panel	Identifying and Recommending Screening Questions for the Accountable Health Communities Model (2016, July) Technical Expert Panel discussion conducted at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Baltimore, MD.
<b>Education</b>	Do you want more information about educational benefits and resources for Veterans? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>	Developed by VHA ACORN team	Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell K, Russell LE. "The Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) Initiative." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, February 2022. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a>
<b>Digital Divide</b>	Do you have access to any of the following devices? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simple cell phone (flip phone)</li> <li>• Smartphone (a cell phone with a touchscreen and internet)</li> <li>• Computer (laptop, desktop, or tablet such as an iPad)</li> <li>• None</li> </ul>	Developed by VHA ACORN team in collaboration with VHA National Social Work Program, VHA Office of Connected Care, and VA Homelessness-Modified ACORN Screening Tool Project Team	Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell K, Russell LE. "The Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) Initiative." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, February 2022. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a>
	Do you have access to affordable and reliable internet at home? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> <li>• I don't want internet access at home</li> </ul>		

Domain	Question	Original Source	Citation
	<p>How often do you run out of phone minutes and/or data before the end of the month?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often</li> <li>• Sometimes</li> <li>• Never</li> <li>• I don't have a cellphone (flip phone or smartphone)</li> </ul>		
<b>Digital Divide, cont.</b>	<p>Veterans can now have video visits with their care team from home or another location of their choice. Would you like help setting up a future video visit with a member of your VA care team?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> <li>• I already know how to do video visits/ I don't need help</li> <li>• I don't know what a video visit is</li> </ul>	Developed by VHA ACORN team in collaboration with VHA National Social Work Program, VHA Office of Connected Care, and VA Homelessness-Modified ACORN Screening Tool Project Team	Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell K, Russell LE. "The Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) Initiative." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, February 2022. <a href="https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf">https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf</a>
	<p>Do you need help learning to use a smartphone, tablet, or computer for <u>video visits</u> at the VA?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> <li>• I don't have any of these devices</li> </ul>		



***If you are interested in citing this work, please use the following information:***

Cohen AJ, Kennedy MA, Mitchell K, Russell LE. "The Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) Initiative." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, February 2022.

[https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN\\_Screening\\_Tool.pdf](https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/docs/ACORN_Screening_Tool.pdf)

***For any questions about the ACORN screener, please contact the ACORN team at [VHABEDACORN@va.gov](mailto:VHABEDACORN@va.gov).***

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Veterans Health Administration National Social Work Program

Veterans Health Administration Office of Connected Care

VA Homelessness-Modified ACORN Screening Tool Project Team (VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System Homeless Patient Aligned Care Team; Center for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research, VA Bedford Healthcare System; Center of Innovation for Long Term Services and Supports, VA Providence Healthcare System; VA New England Healthcare System (VISN 1) Chief Medical Office)

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